THE BUHL HOTEL OF TWIN FALLS COUNTY

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First Printing, 2026

An Exhaustive Analysis of Architectural Heritage, Frontier Violence, and the Phenomenology of the Paranormal

Introduction to the Spatial and Temporal Landscape

The architectural heritage of the American West serves as a physical ledger of the region's rapid transformation from arid, sparsely populated expanses into highly organized hubs of agricultural and commercial enterprise. Within the specific geographic context of the Magic Valley in south-central Idaho, the commercial structures erected during the early twentieth century are emblematic of the massive capital influx and infrastructural development facilitated by federal irrigation initiatives. At the epicenter of this historical narrative stands the Buhl Hotel, a prominent commercial edifice located at 1004 Main Street in the municipality of Buhl, situated within Twin Falls County.[1] Added to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in the autumn of 1985, the building is celebrated not merely as a localized architectural triumph, but as a critical node in a continuous, historic commercial streetscape that defined the civic identity of early Buhl.[2]

However, the empirical significance of the Buhl Hotel is profoundly complicated by its contemporary operational status and the robust sociological phenomena

that surround it. While the ground floor of the structure has been pragmatically repurposed to serve modern community needs—currently housing the West End Senior Center and an associated thrift shop—the upper levels of the hotel have been devoid of paid occupants since 1985.[5] This abrupt cessation of commercial hospitality effectively sealed the second and third stories, leaving them in a state of arrested decay where the artifacts and physical detritus of former residents remain undisturbed.[5]

Out of this stark juxtaposition—a vibrant, utilitarian ground floor anchoring an abandoned, decaying superstructure—a complex and deeply ingrained narrative of paranormal activity has emerged. The Buhl Hotel is currently recognized as a focal point for dark tourism and ghostlore within the Treasure Valley and Magic Valley regions, drawing both amateur thrill-seekers and organized paranormal investigators.[6] The reported hauntings are not culturally isolated; rather, they are inextricably linked to the site's documented history of frontier violence, including the high-profile 1910 suicide of the notorious outlaw Bill Matthews during a confrontation with Pinkerton detectives and local law enforcement.[9] Furthermore, anecdotal accounts of profound personal tragedies occurring within the hotel during the late twentieth century have layered modern trauma over historic violence, solidifying the building's reputation as a site of intense supernatural distress.[10]

This exhaustive research report aims to deconstruct the multi-layered history of the Buhl Hotel. By inter-

rogating the geological and prehistoric context of Twin Falls County, the philanthropic origins of the town, the architectural morphology orchestrated by Michael Koppelman, the detailed criminal history of the Matthews incident, and the modern sociological implications of its haunted reputation, this document will provide a definitive, synthesized analysis of 1004 Main Street. The resulting narrative will demonstrate how the Buhl Hotel functions simultaneously as a preserved architectural artifact, a monument to the harsh realities of frontier expansion, and a dynamic theater for contemporary paranormal folklore.

The Deep Antiquity and the Agricultural Conquest of Twin Falls County

To fully contextualize the emergence of the Buhl Hotel, it is necessary to establish the profound temporal depth of the region in which it resides. Twin Falls County is not merely a product of twentieth-century agricultural ambition; it is a landscape characterized by deep prehistoric significance. According to archaeological surveys maintained by the Idaho State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) in Boise, Twin Falls County boasts a staggering density of historical data, with over 1,846 documented prehistoric archaeological sites and 1,583 historic sites on record as of 2005.[3]

The absolute antiquity of human presence in this region is anchored by the discovery of the Buhl Woman burial site. Dating to approximately 12,600 B.C., this

site represents the second oldest human burial discovered in North America.[3] The presence of prehistoric hunting and fishing camp sites, alongside numerous rock art locations scattered throughout the Snake River Canyon and surrounding areas, indicates that the region has served as a vital sustaining environment for millennia.[3] This immense prehistoric timeline casts the relatively brief, century-long existence of the Buhl Hotel into sharp relief, highlighting the rapid, explosive nature of modern development in the Magic Valley.

The catalyst for this modern development was the implementation of the Carey Act, a piece of federal legislation designed to encourage private investment in the reclamation and irrigation of arid Western lands.[11] The Twin Falls Tract was arguably the most successful execution of the Carey Act, transforming the inhospitable sagebrush steppe into highly fertile agricultural acreage. However, such monumental infrastructural undertakings required unprecedented levels of capital. This financial imperative inextricably linked the dusty plains of south-central Idaho to the industrial wealth of the American East, setting the stage for the foundation of the town of Buhl.

The Philanthropic Vision of Frank and Julia Buhl

The capitalization of the Twin Falls Tract was primarily orchestrated through the financial mechanisms established by Frank H. Buhl, an immensely wealthy

industrialist whose primary base of operations resided in the Shenango Valley of Pennsylvania.[11] To understand the civic foundations of the town where the hotel was subsequently built, one must examine the ethos of its namesake.

Frank Buhl and his wife, Julia, were married in 1888.[12] Their union merged Frank's aggressive ambitions as an industrialist with Julia's deep, abiding affection for her hometown of Sharon, Pennsylvania.[12] While Frank initially harbored plans to expand his corporate empire beyond the Shenango Valley, Julia's profound devotion to the area ultimately convinced him to maintain his primary residence and philanthropic focus there.[12] Together, they constructed a magnificent, castle-like mansion atop Sharon Hill.[12] Designed in the imposing Richardsonian Romanesque style, the mansion served as both a symbol of their immense socioeconomic prominence and a vibrant gathering place for their extended family.[12] Although the Buhls were childless, the mansion was noted for its warmth, serving as a playground for their nieces and nephews who explored its towers and secret passageways.[12]

The Buhls' commitment to civic improvement was highly progressive for the era. In 1903, Frank founded the F.H. Buhl Club, a sprawling recreational center designed to provide free activities for working-class families within his community.[12] This was followed by the creation of Buhl Farm, a massive 300-acre park featuring walking paths, picnic groves, and a golf course, all offered to the public at no cost.[12] Frank Buhl op-

erated under the explicit belief that working families were fundamentally deserving of spaces where they could relax without the imposition of a financial burden.[12] This ethos of radical inclusivity distinguished his philanthropic efforts from the paternalistic charity of many of his Gilded Age contemporaries.

While their primary legacy was cemented in Pennsylvania—where Julia's exquisitely preserved player piano, meticulously restored in Cincinnati in 1984, remains on long-term loan to the Buhl Mansion—Frank Buhl's vast wealth simultaneously propelled him to seek expansive investment opportunities in the American West.[13] His capital underwrote the canals and water systems that made the Twin Falls Tract viable.[11]

In recognition of his foundational investments, the burgeoning settlement was named Buhl in his honor. The town officially opened in April 1906, and by 1907, the crucial railway infrastructure had reached the settlement, instantly linking its agricultural output to broader national markets.[11] Frank Buhl did not view the town as a mere absentee investment; he extended his philanthropic philosophy to the Idaho settlement, famously donating an entire city block and contributing $25,000—which covered half the total construction cost—for the erection of the large brick F.H. Buhl school in 1908.[11]

TABLE 1: FOUNDATIONAL FIGURES AND PHILANTHROPIC CONTEXT

Figure / Entity	Origin / Base	M
Frank H. Buhl	Sharon, Pennsylvania	Tw do co
Julia Buhl	Sharon, Pennsylvania	pr ar ial
F.H. Buhl Club & Farm	Pennsylvania	Bu civ fa
Jim and Donna Winner	Pennsylvania	tic se Bu

The Original Frame Hotel and the Transient Frontier

The rapid influx of settlers, agricultural laborers, water engineers, and commercial speculators into the newly established town of Buhl created an immediate,

desperate demand for hospitality infrastructure. Before the construction of permanent masonry commercial blocks, early Western towns relied on rudimentary, rapidly assembled timber-frame structures. The original incarnation of the Hotel Buhl was exactly this—a prominent wood-frame building situated strategically at the bustling intersection of Main Street and Broadway in downtown Buhl.[2]

This early frame structure served as the vital epicenter of transient life in the nascent municipality. In an era before standardized motels, the downtown boarding house or hotel was a remarkably diverse sociological space. It housed traveling salesmen carrying goods from the East, railroad workers laying the expanding tracks, local politicians organizing the municipality, and individuals operating on the fringes of the law who utilized the transient nature of the frontier to evade capture.

The socio-economic reality of the early Hotel Buhl was chaotic and kinetic. It was a space defined by impermanence. For many, it was the first point of contact with the Magic Valley before moving out to claim agricultural tracts. For others, it was a temporary refuge. This environment of anonymity and high turnover inevitably attracted a criminal element, drawing the hotel into the violent realities of frontier justice.

A Micro-History of Violence: The Spokane Gang and the 1910 Matthews Incident

The history of the Buhl Hotel is inextricably linked to a highly publicized episode of bloodshed that occurred within the original frame structure in the spring of 1910. This event, centering on the suicide of an entrenched outlaw, generated a profound psychological imprint on the property, establishing the foundational trauma that would later fuel its paranormal reputation.[9]

The primary actor in this historical drama was an individual known as Bill Matthews.[9] Described in historical accounts as a physically imposing, heavyset man who bore the rugged appearance and demeanor of an old-time fur trapper, Matthews, then forty-three years old, possessed a criminal pedigree that spanned decades across the Pacific Northwest.[9]

THE ORIGINS OF THE SPOKANE GANG

Matthews's violent history was thoroughly documented long before his arrival in Buhl. In 1890, Matthews and an associate named John Miles were involved in a brutal, close-quarters shootout with Sheriff Felix Pugh in Spokane, Washington.[9] During the violent exchange, Pugh managed to shoot Matthews twice through the arm, while Matthews returned fire, severely wounding the sheriff with a gunshot through the leg.[9] While John Miles was killed during the altercation and buried on the spot, Matthews successfully fled the jurisdiction, initiating a multi-decade pursuit by various law enforcement agencies.[9]

Over the ensuing years, Matthews became a highly sophisticated operator within the criminal underworld of the West. He assumed employment as a stagecoach driver through the rugged terrains of Colorado and Idaho, a position that provided the perfect cover for scouting potential robbery targets, monitoring the movement of payrolls, and establishing escape routes.[9] He also served a three-year sentence in the penitentiary at Walla Walla for horse theft, an experience that presumably hardened his resolve against future incarceration.[9]

Between 1905 and 1908, Matthews emerged as the strategic leader of a loosely organized criminal syndicate colloquially known in underworld whispers as the "Spokane gang".[9] The syndicate was deeply involved in complex horse theft and cattle rustling operations that spanned northern Washington, the panhandle of Idaho, and across the international border into Victoria, British Columbia.[9]

The gang was characterized by a volatile mix of transient personalities. Key members included Bob Splain, a former construction "powder" man and explosives expert who shared a ranch with Matthews north of Hillyard, Washington.[9] Another central figure was Dan Downer, who had reportedly met Matthews while both were incarcerated at Walla Walla.[9] Downer, who frequently operated under the alias D.W. Woods, brought in a drifter named Fred Torgensen.[9] Torgensen, a Scandinavian immigrant who had drifted west following the collapse of Midwestern lumber camps, was a former

locomotive fireman with deep knowledge of rail systems.[9] Known in the saloons of Spokane's Front Street by the moniker "Whitey" due to his distinctly light hair, Torgensen added a layer of unpredictable volatility to the group.[9] Matthews's connections also extended into the illicit sex trade; it was widely reported that he had met an associate named Lillian in a brothel operated by her mother in Idaho, further embedding him in the frontier's shadow economy.[9]

THE FRACTURING OF THE SYNDICATE IN KANSAS CITY

The events directly precipitating the incident at the Buhl Hotel involved severe internal fracturing within the Spokane gang, driven by paranoia, stolen property, and romantic rivalries. Historical accounts tracking the movements of Pinkerton agents and local law enforcement detail a chaotic period for the gang in Kansas City shortly before Matthews's demise.[9]

Matthews had arrived in Kansas City flush with cash. On Saturday, April 3, he visited the shop of a tailor named Gus Bren in downtown Kansas City, accompanied by an associate named Frank.[9] Matthews, demonstrating an air of unbothered affluence, purchased a custom suit of clothes, paying with a large wad of greenbacks.[9] The suit was delivered on April 7, complete with a label bearing the tailor's address, the customer's name, and the date of order sewn into the coat pocket—a detail that would later prove vital in identifying his movements.[9]

However, the wealth did not stabilize the group. Tensions between gang members, specifically involving Torgensen (Fritz), Jack, and Frank, reached a boiling point in a rooming house operated by a landlady named Katie Snell.[9] Arguments erupted over a woman, escalating to the point where Torgensen threatened to shoot Frank's young associate.[9] Frank intervened, physically removing Jack from the rooming house.[9]

The gang rapidly disintegrated into mutual betrayal. By early May, Frank discovered that Torgensen had vanished, but not before rifling through Frank's luggage and stealing his Colt.38 revolver, his leather holster, and deeply personal letters from his family and a woman named Alice.[9] Simultaneously, Downer and Matthews disappeared, leaving only a vague note promising to wire the others later.[9] This sudden, paranoid dispersal sent Matthews fleeing back toward the familiar territories of Idaho, effectively painting a target on his back as abandoned associates became liabilities.

THE SIEGE AT THE BUHL HOTEL

By May of 1910, the multi-jurisdictional pursuit of Bill Matthews had zeroed in on the Magic Valley. A highly motivated coalition of law enforcement, spearheaded by the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, tracked the outlaw to Buhl.[9] The Pinkertons, a private security and detective agency, were notorious for their relentless, often brutal pursuit of outlaws, representing the aggressive privatization of frontier justice. Their

presence in Buhl underscored the high stakes of the operation.

Matthews had secured a room in the original frame structure of the Hotel Buhl. The apprehension team assembled to take him into custody was formidable. It included Buhl City Marshal William E. May, his deputy Frank Clutas, and a seasoned, albeit unidentified, Pinkerton agent who had been tracking Matthews's movements.[9] The authorities possessed active warrants for Matthews on charges of large-scale cattle rustling.[9] For a man with Matthews's history, capture meant an inevitable return to the brutal conditions of the penitentiary—a fate he was apparently determined to avoid.

The climax of the pursuit was defined by its grim lack of physical resistance. Marshal May, Deputy Clutas, and the Pinkerton agent gathered in the hallway outside Matthews's hotel room.[9] Discovering that the door was unfastened, the lawmen flung it open, weapons drawn, and rushed into the confined space.[9]

The scene they encountered was highly organized and thoroughly macabre. Matthews was found sitting upright in a chair positioned squarely in the middle of the room, directly facing the door so that he was looking precisely at the officers as they breached.[9] In front of him sat an open suitcase containing the new suit of clothes he had recently acquired from Gus Bren in Kansas City.[9] Resting atop the suitcase was a heavy.45 caliber Colt revolver and a partly finished letter.[9] The letter was addressed to an associate named J.C. Kelley

in Denver, Colorado, and in it, Matthews calmly described how he had forwarded his other luggage.[9]

Realizing that escape was impossible and unwilling to face the Pinkertons or the penal system, Matthews had executed a meticulously planned suicide just moments before the door opened. The psychological resonance of this event is profound. The deliberate staging of the room—the open suitcase, the new suit, the letter to Denver, the positioning of the chair facing the door—suggests a man seeking complete control over his final moments. This violent rupture of reality within the domestic space of the hotel fundamentally altered the psychological landscape of the property. The blood spilled in the frame hotel by a desperate outlaw would become the foundational bedrock upon which a century of ghostlore would be built.

TABLE 2: THE MATTHEWS SYNDICATE AND THE 1910 APPREHENSION

Participant	Affiliation / Role	N
Bill Matthews	Outlaw / Leader of the Spokane Gang	co H
Felix Pugh	Sheriff (Spokane, Washington)	du in

Fred "Whitey" Torgensen	Syndicate Member / Drifter	m fi Ka
William E. May	Buhl City Marshal	en M
Frank Clutas	Buhl Deputy Marshal	th ro
Unidentified Agent	Pinkerton National Detective Agency	pu lir

Architectural Metamorphosis: The 1920 Koppelman Expansion

Following the dramatic events of the early 1910s, the municipality of Buhl experienced a period of sustained economic stabilization. The agricultural output of the Twin Falls Tract was highly profitable, leading to a maturation of the local commercial infrastructure. The chaotic, impermanent timber buildings of the frontier era were rapidly replaced by robust, fire-resistant masonry structures that projected an image of civic permanence and economic dignity. The evolution of the Buhl Hotel perfectly mirrors this regional trajectory.

By 1920, the demand for sophisticated, modern lodging in Buhl had far outpaced the capacities and safety standards of the original, aging frame structure.[2] The property's owner and primary proprietor, Michael Koppelman, recognized the necessity for a radical expansion.[2] Demonstrating the formidable self-reliance typical of early Western entrepreneurs, Koppelman bypassed the hiring of outside architectural firms and instead acted as his own architect and general contractor.[2] As detailed in the *Buhl Herald* edition of December 16, 1920, Koppelman's ambitious efforts resulted in the construction of a massive, three-story commercial brick edifice built directly adjacent to the original frame hotel.[2]

THE NEOCLASSICAL FACADE AND MATERIAL INNOVATION

The 1920 Hotel Buhl was designed with a vaguely Neoclassical character, relying heavily on strict symmetry, disciplined fenestration, and intricate brick detailing to convey an aura of commercial respectability.[2] The building utilizes an efficient L-shaped plan, a common architectural strategy that maximized valuable street frontage along Main Street while simultaneously accommodating the deep internal spatial requirements necessary for a high-occupancy lodging facility.[2]

The primary facade is a masterclass in early commercial rhythm, divided precisely into two distinct three-bay sections.[2] This rhythmic division was specifically designed to balance the visual mass of the three-

story structure while allowing optimal natural light to penetrate the interior rooms. Each of the three-bay sections is anchored by a central double-hung sash window, which is flanked symmetrically by sets of two double-hung sash windows.[2] The specific window configuration utilizes an eight-over-one light pattern—a detail that emphasizes verticality and was meticulously preserved throughout the building's lifespan.[2]

Materiality played a crucial role in Koppelman's design. The underlying structural framework of the hotel relies on robust brick masonry combined with reinforced concrete, indicating a significant modernization of construction techniques aimed at enhancing load-bearing efficiency and mitigating the ever-present threat of urban fire.[2] The public-facing front wall is clad in a refined brick veneer.[2] This facade is highly ornamented through the use of decorative stretcher courses—bricks laid flat with their long narrow sides exposed—that are carefully arranged to form sophisticated, panel-like designs across the masonry surface.[2]

The fenestration is further defined by the presence of prominent concrete lintels.[2] Notably, these lintels run continuously across the third-story windows, establishing a strong horizontal datum line that visually unifies the upper floor and caps the Neoclassical composition.[2]

An analysis of the side walls reveals the pragmatic, underlying mechanics of the construction. Portions of the building's side elevations were constructed using hollow ceramic block, distinctively orange in color.[2]

The utilization of hollow structural tile was a highly popular engineering innovation during the 1910s and 1920s. These blocks provided excellent thermal mass for insulation, superior fire resistance, and essential structural stability at a significantly lower cost and weight than solid brick masonry.

The integration of the massive new 1920 brick structure with the aging frame building was achieved through carefully planned internal connections. Architectural surveys have documented the presence of a second-story door, now visible on the northeast wall of the brick structure, which originally served as the primary internal passage allowing guests and staff to move seamlessly between the old frontier structure and the modern expansion.[2]

INTERIOR ARRANGEMENTS AND THE COMMERCIAL HUB

The interior of the 1920 Buhl Hotel was meticulously designed to function as a mixed-use commercial and social hub, serving the diverse needs of the growing municipality. The southern half of the building's interior retained a voluminous, open first-story retail space.[2] This grand space was architecturally distinguished by the presence of both front and rear balconies, creating an elegant mezzanine level that overlooked the main retail floor.[2]

Crucially, a significant amount of the historic interior fabric from Koppelman's original construction remains extant, underscoring the building's high degree

of architectural integrity. Preserved elements include the original balcony stairs and their associated ornate railings, massive structural support posts, and a highly decorative pressed sheet-metal ceiling.[2] Pressed tin ceilings were an essential, ubiquitous feature of early twentieth-century commercial interiors. They served a dual purpose: aesthetically, they mimicked the elaborate, highly expensive plasterwork found in upscale European architecture; practically, they provided a vital fire-retardant barrier above the busy commercial spaces.

Over the decades, the ground floor underwent necessary architectural alterations to meet the evolving demands of retail commerce. The configuration of the storefronts was repeatedly adapted. By the 1930s, the space had been permanently reconfigured into two smaller northern storefronts and one massive southern storefront.[2] This specific arrangement was executed to accommodate a J.C. Penney department store.[2] The occupancy by a major, national retail conglomerate like J.C. Penney highlights the absolute centrality and commercial viability of the Buhl Hotel building within the local economy during the Great Depression era. While later, reversible architectural changes were made over the years—such as the application of materials masking the mezzanine lights, the addition of a large exterior canopy, and the installation of a canopy support post—the fundamental historic integrity of the ground floor remained intact.[2]

THE 1908 LAVA ROCK JAIL: A JUXTAPOSITION OF FUNCTIONS

A highly unique and significant historical element incorporated within the property boundaries of the modern Buhl Hotel is a small, one-story lava rock structure located at the rear of the site.[2] Municipal records, supported by the testimony of local townspeople, firmly identify this structure as the original village jail, the construction of which was formally proposed during a Buhl village council meeting held on August 6, 1908.[2]

Although the jail structure currently exists in a state of partial ruin, its remaining walls represent an exemplary execution of native lava rock masonry.[2] The utilization of basalt and lava rock was an indigenous architectural adaptation highly specific to the geology of south-central Idaho. The volcanic remnants of the Snake River Plain provided an abundant, incredibly durable, albeit notoriously difficult-to-work building material. The enduring presence of this 1908 jail structure on the hotel property creates a profound spatial juxtaposition. It places the rudimentary, harsh infrastructure of early municipal law enforcement in direct physical proximity to the sophisticated commercial hospitality of the 1920 hotel, perfectly encapsulating the rapid, often contradictory realities of frontier town development.

TABLE 3: ARCHITECTURAL AND STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF THE 1920 KOPPELMAN EXPANSION

Architectural Element	Specification / Material Details	Pu
Primary Footprint	L-shaped plan, 3 stories	co ou
Facade Masonry	Brick veneer with decorative stretcher courses	cr sig
Side Wall Substrate	Orange hollow ceramic block	fir st
Fenestration	8-over-1 double-hung sash windows in 3-bay rhythmic sections	m
Lintel Structures	Continuous concrete across the 3rd story	tu
Interior Ceilings	Pressed sheet-metal (tin)	ac co

Mid-Century Operations, Economic Decline, and Historic Preservation

Throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century, the Buhl Hotel operated continuously as a vital, stabilizing node in the transient and commercial life of Twin Falls County. The hotel hosted an endless stream of traveling salesmen, seasonal agricultural workers, visiting dignitaries, and tourists. The constant presence of national retail tenants, most notably J.C. Penney, on the expansive ground floor ensured that the building remained the undisputed locus of daily community activity and economic exchange.[2]

However, the post-World War II era introduced profound, irreversible shifts in American travel logistics and hospitality economics. The aggressive expansion of the interstate highway system, the universal proliferation of the personal automobile, and the subsequent rise of purpose-built, highway-adjacent motor lodges fundamentally destroyed the traditional business model of the downtown commercial hotel. Travelers no longer relied on railroad depots and their adjacent main street lodgings; instead, the market favored the drive-up convenience and standardized amenities of motels located on the sprawling outskirts of towns.

Consequently, the Buhl Hotel experienced a prolonged, multi-decade period of economic stagnation. The upper floors, dedicated entirely to lodging, saw their occupancy rates steadily decline. The demographic of the hotel shifted from affluent travelers to

low-income, long-term transient residents. Maintenance was inevitably deferred. By the year 1985, the economic viability of the hotel operation had completely and finally collapsed, and the building officially ceased to accept paid occupants.[6] This unceremonious closure marked the definitive end of an era for the Buhl Hotel as a functioning hospitality enterprise.

THE DESIGNATION OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES (NRHP)

Paradoxically, the final cessation of the hotel's commercial operations coincided precisely with a formal, state-level recognition of the building's profound historical and architectural significance. On September 12, 1985, the Hotel Buhl (Reference Number: 85002158) was officially entered into the National Register of Historic Places.[2]

The rigorous nomination process was a direct reflection of broader, highly organized historic preservation movements operating within Twin Falls County during the 1980s. The local Historic Preservation Commission, functioning as a highly active participant in the Certified Local Government (CLG) Program administered by the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and the Idaho State Historical Society, systematically surveyed and nominated vital structures to protect the region's rapidly disappearing architectural heritage.[3]

The Buhl Hotel was recognized and protected not merely for its specific Koppelman architecture, but for

its anchoring role in the "continuous streetscape of commercial buildings" that defined the historic visual identity of downtown Buhl.[2] Through this designation, the hotel joined a distinguished, heavily protected list of Twin Falls County historical sites. These peers included the residential elegance of the Burton Morse House, the industrial utilitarianism of the 1978 Idaho Power Substation, and the civic grandeur of the Kimberly High School.[3]

The NRHP designation provided a crucial, legally binding layer of protection against urban renewal demolition projects. The designation highlighted the fact that the vast majority of Koppelman's original 1920 fabric remained remarkably extant, specifically citing the integrity of the brick masonry walls, the intricate second- and third-story concrete detailing, and the original window sashes.[2] Ultimately, the property was formally classified as containing two contributory buildings to the historical record: the main 1920 three-story hotel structure and the ruins of the 1908 lava rock jail.[2]

TABLE 4: PEER HISTORIC PRESERVATION SITES IN TWIN FALLS COUNTY

Historic Property	Location	NRHP Additio Year

Buhl Hotel	1004 Main St., Buhl	1985
Idaho Power Substation	Twin Falls	1978
Burton Morse House	Van Buren St., Twin Falls	1993
Kimberly High School	Kimberly	1990
James Alvis House	Pole Line Rd., Twin Falls	1980

The Architecture of Abandonment and Artifact Preservation

The permanent closure of the hotel's upper floors in 1985 initiated a profound ontological and physical shift in the building's existence. While the ground floor was eventually successfully repurposed and rigorously maintained to serve contemporary community needs, the vast spaces of the second and third stories were abandoned, subjected entirely to the slow, entropic forces of time.

Today, the sprawling ground floor of the 1004 Main Street structure houses the West End Senior Center and an associated community thrift shop.[5] This lower level is characterized by the bright hum of daily activity, crucial civic engagement, and the mundane, prag-

matic realities of modern social service provision. It is well-lit, climate-controlled, and firmly, undeniably rooted in the present day.

However, ascending the original wooden staircases to the upper levels of the former hotel transports the observer across a jarring temporal and psychological boundary. Local chroniclers, visitors, and paranormal investigators consistently note a distinct, almost cinematic phenomenon: as one moves upstairs, the maintained, modern environment of the senior center visually and acoustically "fades out," and the haunted, decaying reality of the 1920s hotel rapidly materializes around them.[5]

The upper floors operate as an accidental, massive time capsule. Following the sudden financial collapse and closure in 1985, the dozens of lodging rooms were not systematically cleared, auctioned, or sanitized. Instead, they remain heavily populated with the physical detritus of nearly a century of transient occupation. The rooms are explicitly described as being updated with the actual artifacts left behind by the former, final residents of the hotel.[5]

Personal belongings, articles of clothing, and heavy antique furniture litter the decaying hallways and rooms. The material culture of the hotel occasionally bleeds out into the broader community; for example, regional estate sales have prominently featured high-value antiques salvaged from the property, such as a large antique dresser constructed with a tin mirror and

ornate gingerbread detailing, specifically authenticated as originating out of the "old Buhl hotel".[19]

The continued presence of these everyday artifacts in situ is highly significant to the building's current identity. According to the custodians of the structure, these items belong to individuals whose fates varied drastically, but were universally tragic—some of the former residents died within the rooms, while others are said to have "ran far away," abandoning their worldly possessions in sudden flights of panic, extreme poverty, or distress.[5] In the context of material culture studies, these abandoned objects undergo a massive semantic shift. They are no longer functional items of daily use; they become evocative talismans of absence. The artifacts anchor the historical memory of the space, providing tangible, heartbreaking links to the marginalized, the highly transient, and the forgotten individuals who populated the hotel during its long, slow decline.

The Emergence of the Paranormal Epoch: Ghostlore and Societal Trauma

The extreme juxtaposition of the active, living ground floor with the static, artifact-laden, abandoned upper floors creates an environment perfectly calibrated for the generation and perpetuation of modern ghostlore. Spaces that are suspended in a state of arrested decay, particularly those intrinsically associated with verified historical violence (such as the 1910 sui-

cide of Bill Matthews) and the palpable melancholy of sudden, desperate abandonment, are universally susceptible to hauntological interpretations. The Buhl Hotel has not resisted this narrative; rather, it has fully embraced this identity, transitioning into one of the most prominent, heavily trafficked sites for paranormal activity and dark tourism in the state of Idaho.[6]

THE 1990S AND THE INTERSECTION OF GRIEF AND THE OCCULT

The modern paranormal reputation of the Buhl Hotel is not based solely on century-old outlaw shootouts. The lore is heavily continually refreshed by accounts of severe trauma occurring much closer to the present day. Anonymous accounts shared within community historical forums allude to deeply disturbing experiences that took place in the hotel during the early 1990s, a period when the property was rapidly changing hands and portions of the building were apparently utilized for impromptu, desperate housing.[10]

One highly detailed local account describes a family utilizing the space to nurse an aunt who was in the terminal stages of AIDS during the early 1990s.[10] This grounds the history of the hotel squarely within a devastating national health crisis, illustrating how the decaying structure absorbed the intense grief and trauma of its occupants. According to the account, the dying woman, heavily intoxicated and deeply angry at her prognosis, engaged in occult practices, specifically utilizing a Ouija board within the confines of the hotel.[10]

The residents reported that following this event, the paranormal activity in the building escalated violently. The narrative explicitly states that "something bad was let in," leading to terrifying, oppressive phenomena characterized as "shit you would not believe".[10] The psychological terror induced by these events had direct, verifiable economic consequences for the property; the sheer intensity of the haunting allegedly caused the family to sell the hotel when the narrator was ten years old.[10] Subsequently, the immense stigma and continued paranormal distress caused the massive property to be sold five more times within a frantic four-year period, a stunning rate of turnover for a historic commercial block.[10] Whether interpreted by researchers as a genuine manifestation of supernatural entities or as the profound psychological projection of a family navigating terminal illness, substance abuse, and grief within a dark, decaying building, these narratives heavily color the modern reputation of the Buhl Hotel, earning it the regional moniker of "absolute nightmare fuel".[8]

THE CUSTODIANSHIP OF "CHUCK" AND THE EXPERIENTIAL NARRATIVE

The primary conduit for managing and disseminating the paranormal narrative of the Buhl Hotel today is the current keeper of the building, a man identified locally simply as "Chuck".[5] Operating out of the West End Senior Center on the ground floor, Chuck occupies a highly unique, dual sociological role: he serves as

both the physical custodian of the historic property and the primary curator of its expansive supernatural lore.

Recognizing the immense public interest generated by the ghost stories, Chuck facilitates guided tours of the abandoned upper floors.[5] These tours grant the public heavily supervised access to a space that has otherwise been locked away from society for nearly four decades.[5] During these excursions, Chuck disseminates a rich, carefully constructed oral history that intentionally blurs the boundaries between verified architectural history and subjective paranormal experience. He recounts "brilliant stories" of the hotel during its active, bustling commercial years, ensuring that the human, lived element of the building's history is not entirely eclipsed by its spooky modern reputation.[5]

Crucially, Chuck provides vivid firsthand accounts of his own myriad paranormal experiences while working alone within the massive building.[5] While highly specific details—such as the exact physical descriptions of spectral sightings or the individual names of spirits—are often strategically withheld to preserve the experiential mystery and tension of the tours, the overarching narrative he presents suggests a space incredibly saturated with residual energies. He reinforces the concept that the spirits are intrinsically, inextricably tied to the physical artifacts left rotting in the rooms; the scattered clothing and antique furniture of those who died or fled act as supernatural tethers, perma-

nently binding the traumas of the past to the physical reality of the present.[5]

TABLE 5: CHRONOLOGICAL EVOLUTION OF PARANORMAL LORE AND MEDIA INTERACTION

Timeframe	Event / Phase	To
1910	Suicide of Outlaw Bill Matthews	tra fro
Early 1990s	AIDS Patient / Ouija Board Incident	an su (5
Present Era	Custodianship by "Chuck"	ab pu Ce
July 2025	S.P.C.H. Paranormal Investigation	(S ha in

Dark Tourism, Technology, and the Media Feedback Loop

The intense local lore cultivated by Chuck and the persistent community anecdotes have inevitably drawn the attention of highly organized, technologically equipped paranormal investigation groups. This attention has further solidified the hotel's status in the annals of Western dark tourism, moving the narrative from local rumor into the realm of recorded digital media. The integration of technology into the exploration of the Buhl Hotel provides an illusion of empirical, scientific validation to the ghostlore.

A highly notable and recent example of this phenomenon is the extensive investigation conducted by the S.P.C.H. (Society for Paranormal and Creature Haunts) team.[7] In July of 2025, lead investigators Curt Tuckfield and Melanie conducted a highly publicized, rigorous paranormal investigation of the haunted Buhl Hotel.[7] Their methodology relied heavily on the capture of electronic voice phenomenon (EVP), specifically utilizing an SB7 Spirit Box.[7] This device is designed to rapidly sweep through radio frequencies at high speeds, creating a bed of white noise that paranormal theorists allege allows spirits to manipulate the frequencies to form audible words and intelligent voices.[7] The S.P.C.H. team claimed to have successfully captured these "Spirit Box voices" during their time in the abandoned upper floors.[7] The public dissemination of these investigations through digital media channels like YouTube serves a vital function: it democratizes

the haunting, allowing individuals far outside the geographic confines of Idaho to engage intimately with the site's spectral narrative.[7]

The regional tourism apparatus and local media have actively participated in, and profited from, this phenomenon. Tourism boards, such as Southern Idaho Tourism, and local radio stations like 1043 Wow Country heavily promote the Buhl Hotel during the autumn and Halloween seasons.[6] In their promotional materials, the Buhl Hotel is consistently positioned as a premier destination, ranked alongside other notorious Idaho haunts such as the Old Idaho Penitentiary in Boise and the Canyon Hill Cemetery.[5] Articles explicitly highlighting the rare opportunity to tour a massive commercial building that has been completely abandoned since 1985 leverage the haunting aesthetic of urban decay to attract thrill-seekers.[6]

This intensive media amplification creates a self-sustaining feedback loop. The genuine history of the hotel generates the initial lore; the media advertises and sensationalizes that lore; tourists and ghost hunters arrive to validate the lore through personal experience; and their subsequent digital documentation generates entirely new layers of lore. Through this mechanism, the Buhl Hotel ensures its continued cultural relevance.

Sociological Synthesis: Haunting as Architectural Preservation

The current state of the Buhl Hotel provides a profound, highly unique opportunity to examine the deep sociological utility of ghostlore in the specific context of historic architectural preservation. From an anthropological standpoint, a haunting is rarely just a straightforward supernatural claim. Rather, it operates as a complex cultural mechanism by which a community processes historical trauma, navigates the anxieties of severe economic decline, and ultimately, protects its physical architectural heritage from erasure.

When the Buhl Hotel ceased all lodging operations in 1985, it joined thousands of other massive commercial buildings across the American Midwest and West that faced the highly probable threat of demolition through neglect. Without a viable, capitalist economic purpose for its expansive upper floors, the natural, expected trajectory for such a structure is roof failure, structural ruin, and eventual removal by the municipality to make way for new development. However, the organic emergence and subsequent cultivation of the paranormal narrative actively interrupted this destructive trajectory. The ghost stories provided a completely new form of utility for the space: the building transitioned from producing monetary capital via lodging to producing immense cultural capital via folklore.

The haunting narrative ensures that the building remains highly visible, constantly discussed, and eco-

nomically viable in the public consciousness. Chuck's guided tours and the relentless media coverage of investigations by teams like S.P.C.H. transform the abandoned upper floors into a dynamic, experiential museum. Visitors do not pay simply to look at Neoclassical brickwork or hollow ceramic block; they pay to feel the crushing weight of history, to interact nervously with the physical artifacts of those who fled, and to seek an adrenaline-fueled, visceral connection with the past. In this way, the phenomenon of "dark tourism" acts as a rogue, shadow-form of historic preservation. The building is maintained, valued, and fiercely protected by the community not in spite of its dark history, the violence of Bill Matthews, or its physical decay, but precisely because of it.

Furthermore, the specific nature of the Buhl Hotel hauntings—centered largely on the mundane artifacts of the marginalized, the despair of terminal illness, and the brutal trauma of the frontier—reflects a deep communal desire to remember the unvarnished, often ugly realities of the past. Traditional historical narratives frequently focus exclusively on the triumphs of the elite, such as Frank Buhl, the wealthy benefactor who built the town. Ghostlore, conversely, gives a powerful, lasting voice to the failures, the outlaws, and the impoverished transients who left their cheap dressers and battered suitcases behind in the dark. The haunted Buhl Hotel serves as a democratic, egalitarian repository of memory, where the elite architectural ambitions

of Michael Koppelman must eternally share space with the spectral echoes of the desperate.

Conclusion

The Buhl Hotel, located at 1004 Main Street, represents a structure of immense historical, architectural, and cultural density within the state of Idaho. Built upon the incredible economic optimism of the Carey Act and the Twin Falls Tract, and heavily supported by the philanthropic foundation of the Buhl family, the site evolved rapidly from a rudimentary, chaotic frontier outpost into a highly sophisticated Neoclassical commercial center under the bold guidance of Michael Koppelman. Throughout its century of existence, it survived the jarring transitions of twentieth-century commerce, bearing silent witness to the violent, bloody realities of frontier justice—most notably the meticulously planned 1910 suicide of the notorious Spokane Gang leader, Bill Matthews—before eventually succumbing to the harsh, irreversible economic realities of the modern interstate highway era.

Today, formally and legally recognized by the National Register of Historic Places, the building lives a fractured, deeply fascinating existence. The ground-floor West End Senior Center firmly anchors the structure to the present day, providing vital, pragmatic community services. Yet, it is the sprawling, abandoned, artifact-strewn upper floors that secure the building's permanent place in the regional imagination.

Cultivated by passionate custodians like Chuck, traumatized by the tragedies of the late twentieth century, and continually amplified by modern, technologically driven paranormal investigations, the ghostlore surrounding the Buhl Hotel transforms a decaying commercial infrastructure into a vibrant, economically active site of dark tourism. Through the synthesis of its Neoclassical architectural grandeur, its preserved material artifacts, and its terrifying spectral legends, the Buhl Hotel stands not merely as a static relic of Idaho's past, but as a continuing, urgent dialogue between the living, the dead, and the physical spaces they leave behind.

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